Refugees: Victims of Social Disintegration

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For years to come, a single word will sum up both social disintegration and the plight of refugees in their most extreme forms: Rwanda.

In less than four months, from 6 April to the end of July 1994, this tiny overcrowded country of some 8 million people suffered one of the most sudden and devastating collapses in history. Within the first few weeks, an apparently orchestrated campaign of genocide led to an estimated 1 million deaths. By late April, 50,000 refugees had fled to Burundi (which had itself produced 700,000 refugees only six months earlier), Uganda and Zaire. Then, in the space of 24 hours starting on 28 April, some 250,000 Rwandese refugees poured into Tanzania. At the time, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) described it as the "largest and fastest exodus" it had ever witnessed. That label remained valid until mid-July, when a million Rwandese refugees crossed into Zaire near the town of Goma, totally overwhelming the relief agencies. Another 400,000 had entered Zaire further south, and 200,000 had gone to Burundi. By August, between half and two-thirds of the country's population were refugees, displaced or dead. Hundreds of villages were empty; ripened crops were rotting in the fields; and the refugees in Goma were dying in the thousands from cholera, dysentery and other diseases.

Complex Causes of Refugee Flows

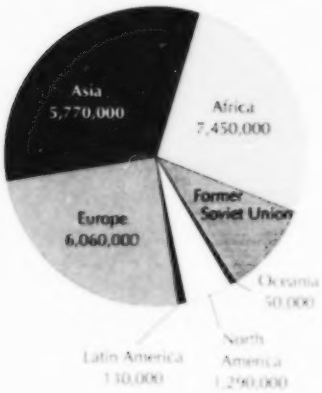
Refugees are the ultimate symptom of social disintegration. They are the last, most obvious, link in a chain of causes and effects that define the extent of a country's social and political breakdown. Looked at globally, they are a barometer of the current state of human civilization.

- By the end of 1993, before the latest Rwanda disaster, UNHCR was responsible for the protection and assistance of 23 million refugees and others in a similar predicament, including 4.1 million people in the former Yugoslavia alone.
- Taking an additional 26 million internally displaced people into account, one in every 115 people on Earth had been forced from their homes.
- There were still 3.3 million Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, and 1.3 million Mozambican refugees remained in six neighbouring countries. A further 19 countries or regions had between 100,000 and 1 million of their citizens living as refugees in other countries.
- Iran was hosting more refugees than any other country, namely 1.85 million Afghans and 645,000 Iraqis, making a total of 2.5 million. Pakistan had 1.5 million refugees. A further 32 countries were hosting between 100,000 and 1 million refugees each. Of these countries, 18 were in Africa, five in Asia, four in Europe, and two each in North America and the former Soviet Union.
- A total of 47 states and regions — one quarter of all the countries in the world — were either the recipient or the place of origin of more than 100,000 refugees.
- Eight countries were simultaneously the recipient and the place of origin of over 100,000 refugees: namely, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Iraq, Burundi, Ethiopia, Liberia, Rwanda and the Sudan.

The immediate causes of refugee flows of this magnitude are invariably conflict or massive human rights violations. Since the end of the cold war, virtually all conflicts have been either predominantly or wholly internal in nature.

The long-simmering root causes that lead to the final explosion of violence and displacement, however, are often a complex and interrelated mixture of social, political, economic and environmental forces. Poverty and population pressures leading to competition over scarce resources, serious social inequalities,

Global Refugee Statistics*



*Includes some persons in refugee-like situations who are of concern to UNHCR; excludes ca. 3 million Palestinian refugees under the direct mandate of UNRWA.

Source: UNHCR

divisive or exclusionary politics, arms proliferation and inadequate or decayed central and local government structures may all play a role. The ingredients will differ from situation to situation, but the results — destruction, death and displacement — are depressingly similar.

Rising Numbers of Refugees

UNHCR was set up in 1951 with a mandate to protect and assist refugees — mainly those left over from World War II — and to find lasting solutions to their problems. The organization was seen as temporary, with an initial life-span of only three years, as a result of misplaced optimism that once the massive displacement created by the second "war to end all wars" had been cleared up, refugees would by and large become a phenomenon of the past. Instead, since the mid-1970s, the number of refugees around the world has soared:

- In 1976, UNHCR was looking after 2.8 million refugees.
- By 1980, that number had tripled, to 8.2 million.
- Since 1986, when there were 12.4 million people of concern to UNHCR, the global total has risen at an average rate of 1.5 million people per year.

Since the end of the cold war, the nature of most refugee-producing situations has changed, but the general trend of inexorably rising numbers has, if anything, grown more intense as States splinter bloodily along historical or ethnic lines. In addition, displacement has spread to new areas, such as the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Already several of the States that have gained independence over the past few years have experienced tremendous damage: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia and Tajikistan, for example, have all suffered from major conflicts that have led to refugee exoduses or massive internal displacement. In all these cases, the ethnic or nationalist nature of the conflict was underpinned, to varying degrees, by the political, social and economic upheaval that accompanied independence. Other newly independent States, however, including many in Eastern Europe, as well as Namibia and Eritrea, have been making the transition from one political system to another without succumbing to the fatal cocktail of causes that lead to conflict and forced displacement.

Social Development: A Key to Prevention

Many young States lack the basic social and legal apparatus necessary to protect human rights. Nationalism thrives in such conditions, compounded by poor education, distorted or unforgiving history and unscrupulous politicians prepared to exploit ethnic tensions to further their own political ends.

Without extensive social, economic and political development to shore up fragile coun-

Top Ten Countries of Asylum

Islamic Republic of Iran*	2,400,000
Zaire*	1,580,000
Pakistan	1,480,000
USA	950,000
Sudan	750,000
Guinea	580,000
Tanzania*	540,000
Fed. Rep. of Yugoslavia*	450,000
Canada	340,000
Armenia	340,000

Top Ten Countries of Origin

3,270,000	Afghanistan*
2,200,000	Rwanda*
720,000	Iraq
700,000	Liberia
520,000	Somalia
430,000	Eritrea
370,000	Sudan
330,000	Azerbaijan
330,000	Angola
310,000	Sierra Leone

All figures as of 31.12.1993, except those marked (*), which are as of September 1994.
Source: UNHCR

Major Repatriations

	Returnees
Afghanistan	2,600,000
Iraq	1,510,000
Mozambique	1,000,000
Ethiopia	600,000
Burundi	450,000
Rwanda	430,000
Cambodia	367,000
Somalia	180,000
Myanmar	75,000
Viet Nam	64,000
Tajikistan	41,000
Lao People's Democratic Republic	18,500

Figures from September 1994
Source: UNHCR

tries that have either already produced refugees or are in danger of doing so, it seems likely that more countries will join those — such as Angola, Rwanda and Afghanistan — which have been locked in a vicious cycle of war and displacement for years, or even decades.

Improvement of the social fabric and the establishment of responsible political leadership, particularly with regard to the accommodation of minorities, are key factors in solving existing refugee problems. They are also essential if embryonic crises are to be prevented from creating large numbers of new refugees.

Declining economies have another, indirect, detrimental effect on refugees. Fearing large numbers of immigrants — both refugees and economic migrants — many Governments have reacted by placing stricter limits on immigration. Under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is someone who can prove "a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, member of a particular social group or political opinion" in his or her country of origin. A perceived or real rise in the number of economic migrants posing as asylum-seekers has in turn led to a tightening of asylum procedures, with the inevitable result that genuine asylum-seekers are faced with a wall of suspicion that lowers their chances to obtain refugee status.

Development: Crucial for Durable Solutions

The refugee story is not, however, one of unmitigated gloom. In some corners of the world — especially Central America, South-East Asia and southern Africa — the advent of peace has led to large numbers of refugees returning home in recent years. Between the beginning of 1990 and the end of 1993, around 7 million refugees went back to their countries of origin. The voluntary repatriation of 370,000 Cambodian refugees, many of whom had been outside their home country for more than a decade, was completed in time for the May 1993 elections.

Voluntary repatriation is generally considered the "preferred solution" by UNHCR, the international community in general and the great majority of refugees themselves. For repatriation to be a truly durable solution, the country of origin needs to have solved the political problems — usually by means of a peace agreement or significant changes in the political and human rights arenas — that led to the original outflow. However, peace and the opportunity to return home are not enough.

The countries to which refugees return are often devastated: villages razed to the ground; bridges blown up; roads and fields mined; irrigation systems collapsed; schools, clinics and other basic infrastructure in ruins. The people themselves — both those who left and those who staved behind — are often daunted by the task of rebuilding their lives virtually from scratch.

By August 1994, some 900,000 out of the original total of more than 1.5 million Mozambican refugees had returned home to a country shattered by 16 years of civil war. As in Cambodia, the successful social and economic reintegration of the Mozambican returnees — as well as an estimated 4 million internally displaced people — will depend on the maintenance of the political reconciliation process, as well as the design and implementation of social and economic development programmes.

UNHCR can, at most, help returning refugees take their initial steps along the path to development and self-sufficiency. While they are still in camps in their countries of asylum, UNHCR and other agencies try to make the most of the refugees' existing skills and capabilities. Increasingly, attempts are being made to improve educational facilities for refugee children and to teach adults, particularly women, income-generating skills that will benefit them not only during their time in the camps but also after their return home.

In recent years, in an attempt to boost returnees' chances of reintegrating successfully, UNHCR has broadened its humanitarian assistance inside countries of origin to include small-scale projects designed to fulfill some of the most immediate social development needs of the communities receiving large numbers of returnees. By benefitting the entire community, such projects aim to calm, rather than exacerbate, frictions between returnees and those

who remained in their country. They are also intended to capitalize on communities' own expertise and commitment to rebuilding their societies, and place special emphasis on the important role of women as "agents" of economic and social development.

However, much work remains to be done on smoothing the interface between humanitarian operations and development programmes. There is a need for further innovative humanitarian responses inside countries of origin. By the same token, since the usefulness of humanitarian assistance is by its nature limited in time and scope, development strategies need to be more closely geared to the immediate, as well as the long-term, needs of communities struggling to absorb returning refugees.

The rebuilding of Cambodia and Mozambique has begun, but is far from finished. Preparations for the rebuilding of Angola and Liberia were stopped in their tracks when both countries slid back into conflict.

The rebuilding of Rwanda will present an even more formidable challenge. Between 1959 and 1964, Rwanda produced at least 150,000 refugees. Further outbreaks of conflict and persecution in 1973 and 1990 led to hundreds of thousands more refugees and displaced people, followed by over 2 million new refugees in 1994. A huge effort will be needed both by the Rwandese themselves and by international community to break the cycl massacre and displacement once and for a willingness to invest in social development be an essential part of that effort.

For further reading:

- *The State of the World's Refugees: Challenge of Protection*. New York: Peng 1993. 208 pp. The next edition of this re will be published in September 1995.
- *Refugees*. UNHCR's quarterly magazine.

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